

Dinner & Diatribes

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Dinner & Diatribes

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Summary

After the TVA is dismantled, Loki ends up in the sacred timeline once again, this time the only Loki in that universe. Consequently, he ends up on the doorstep of the Sorcerer Supreme, who hopes to recruit him to join his little Multiverse Defense Team™, of which Wanda Maximoff is also a part of (following the Westview Incident). After making a definite decision to join the two sorcerers, Loki experiences a whole new kind of love and acceptance. However, the past always lingers on in the distance, seeking to emerge once again.

Chapter 1

Prologue

POV of Loki Laufeyson

Something I have learned about the mortal world is that the City of New York is never at a complete rest. There might be nights during which cars are intermittent with passing down the street, and from those nights may spawn others where fewer people than usual walk beside darkened alleyways. Ultimately, however, there are always people who remain lively during the latest hours of the dusk. Those very people might even be more restless than they would be during the day, as instead of feeding off the hot rays of the sun, they obtain fuel from the twinkling lights of the few stars that have not been suppressed by the bustling city's manmade radiance.

It is around 8:00 in the evening, and the entrance to the Sanctum Sanctorum is dressed in shadows. The building's brick and ivory exterior holds the panes of many intricately designed windows, and each window has a dim sort of light shining behind the glass. A screen door towards the very top leads to what seems to be a small balcony, which is something that is very enticing to me as a result of living in a palace for all my life. I can almost imagine myself standing on the structure's surface and becoming a silent observer of this city's electric nightlife. The chill that hangs in the air only further entices me, as I thrive in this exact type of weather.

Stephen Strange stands beside me, arms crossed over his chest. His dark blue robes are gently toyed with by the breeze, as is his sentient red cloak. He makes no reaction to the wind's presence and instead observes my wistful smile.

"It is captivating," I finally tell him as I gaze up at the looming hideout. Cars fly down the street behind us, sending forth a draft that seeks to ruffle the jacket of my casual black suit.

Stephen keeps his eyes on me, smiling as if in an attempt to sell this way of living. "It's even nicer on the inside. Tons of space for people to live, probably even more to your liking than that palace you and your brother shared."

"I still don't think this is a good idea," I turn my head towards him in order to properly deliver my remark. "I mean, keeping me here? On Earth? You do realize the Midgardians don't exactly view me... *fondly*?"

The corner of Stephen's mouth tilts up in a sort of amused manner, and behind us both, another car rushes by. Stephen takes a step towards me, sarcasm dethroning any genuity in his voice. "You know, Wanda said almost the *exact same thing*. I think you two will be best friends."

"Well, she did not command an army of Chitauri to destroy the entire City of New York." I cross my arms over my chest, redirecting my gaze to the Sanctum.

"You clearly weren't here for the *Lagos* incident," Stephen responds. He also returns to facing the building as his cloak sways behind him.

There is nothing but the noise of the city to serenade us for a few moments, then Stephen releases a sigh. "Loki, I picked you up after you single-handedly dismantled the Time Variance Authority. The TVA is in charge of everything. They controlled *Thanos*. There aren't many people who can do what you did."

Slowly, I turn my head towards him and raise an eyebrow. "So you see good in me?"

“I see power that’s aligned on a more neutral scale right now.” Stephen meets my gaze as the breeze passes through us. His features are stern, and there is an unwavering genuity in his grey eyes. The hue of his irises resemble the color of the smoke that rises from a raging fire. “The Avengers are dead, and there aren’t many people left to protect this world. I think you have the potential to be one of the next great heroes, to work for that good that you so desperately want to achieve.”

“And what if I don’t want that ‘good’?”

“Then you can at least work to be the next great villain in this world by vanquishing all the rest.” Stephen sighs again and turns towards his Sanctum. “Either way, it’s your decision. I’m aware that you don’t like being ‘forced into things’.”

“You would be correct on that notion.” I curiously watch him stare ahead, a hint of bemusement gracing my features.

He just raises both his arms and prepares to make a mystical motion with them. His head quickly whips to the side in order to bring down his gaze on me. “If you decide to join us, then I’ll see you at dinner. If not, well, I’m sure we’ll cross paths again someday.”

My mouth remains slightly open, but no response escapes. Stephen just looks forward again and waves his hands, calling forth his ancient sorcery as one would hail a taxi. His scarlet cloak rises off the concrete sidewalk just as his feet do, and he disappears without any cloud of smoke to conceal his magic.

I am left standing silently in the face of this esteemed New York building. Its elegant presence overwhelms me, which is strange for someone who was raised a prince. But perhaps I never truly saw the palace as a safe space, and maybe that means that I see this sanctum as one. The feeling heightens my curiosity while I stand watching activity occur in the window of the top right corner. The lamplight flickers and flashes, and what appears to be red streams of magic creeps into view. The magic even resembles my own in everything except color.

I glance around at the nightfallen streets of New York. The cars drive by with great celerity, and billboards of advertisements remain illuminated by the lights beneath them. No people are walking by to see me, though; the only current occupants of the night are passengers to cars and taxis. I used to crave attention. I *thrived* on it. Now the lack of it is even greater satisfaction to me.

A heavy sigh escapes me, then I begin to trek up the concrete steps that lead to those large dark blue doors.

Chapter 2

The doors to the Sanctum close behind me with a quiet thud, and I am met with the building's vast and dim foyer. One large staircase diverges into two, with armchairs and coffee tables beneath each one. Two propped open doors to the dining hall lie at the top of the main staircase. An overall ancient and antique ambience persists, complemented by the espresso wood of which the walls and floors are composed. Lamps spread about the seating areas provide the interior with some dim light.

I take a moment to wander about the first floor, gazing up as I slowly walk about. The doors to the entrance are surrounded by beautiful square windows, through which darkened buildings and the night sky can be seen. With the slight quirk of a smile, I begin to spin on my heel in order to stroll over towards the seating area on the right. There is a lovely antique globe seated on top of the dark oak coffee table, and its mint condition entices me. However, just as I approach the decor, I sense an abnormality in thought. It is as if someone has their hands all over my mind, sifting through the entity as if it is a library of ancient texts. The action causes me to drop both hands to my sides as I turn to face the staircase.

A woman stands at the foot of the one on the left, hand clutching the intricately carved rail. Her flowing hair matches the hue of a jar of marmalade, and her essence is just as sweet, despite the fact that her mind is fractured by years of perpetual grief. There is a glint of scarlet trapped in her typically blue irises, but as she releases the railing, that shimmer fades. She is dressed in a long-sleeve maroon shirt as well as black leggings, colors which I know are favorites of hers.

I begin to unweave myself from her mind as I finally meet her eyes. My head tilts slightly to the side. "Clearly we are both becoming familiarized with each other through similar mind tricks. How about we try simple conversation?"

"Sorry. Force of habit." Her voice holds a Sokovian accent despite the fact that the country was obliterated about a decade ago. She starts down the main staircase to meet me at its feet, to which I begin to trek. Just as the two of us come to face each other, she extends her hand with a slightly tired smile. "I'm Wanda."

I observe her features for a moment, then move to shake her hand. My eyes remain locked with hers as I present a more amiable demeanor. "Loki."

"I have heard a lot about you." Wanda releases my hand and begins to interlace her fingers in front of her waist. "People here—normal people—like to talk about past mistakes. But..." Her eyes flicker to me, and her irises regain that intense crimson hue. "They like to talk about me, too."

"Is that why you joined Stephen?" I inquire curiously.

She breathes in sharply, her eyes returning to normal as she remains slightly stiff. "It's part of the reason."

There is no further explanation, so I manage a smile that showcases slight nervousness. Wanda just raises her pointer finger, mouth open as if to speak. With a contemplative expression, she comes to a conclusion.

"I can show you where you'll be staying. Stephen said you would probably prefer the top floor, so the two of us set up a room there." Wanda begins to turn on her heel, but she gestures with a sort of 'come along' motion. "You can follow me."

So, as she treks up the staircase and passes the entrance to the dining hall, I begin to trail along behind her. When faced with two directions in which to go, she chooses the path that diverges to the right, and the two of us wander up these dark wooden steps. The wood creaks and groans beneath us, showcasing its age due to its waning strength. I pay it no mind, though, as I am aware of the stable foundations beneath us.

“Where is Stephen?” I ask Wanda while glancing towards the waiting floor. It appears to be a lengthy and open library, complete with scattered statues and other displays of modern art. The books on the shelves buzz with a tempting power, one that I can feel and therefore am craving without having even skimmed over their contents. “He vanished, but never informed me of where he was off to.”

Wanda ignores the library and makes a turn to the next spiraling set of stairs. “I’m not sure, actually. He tends to have thoughts that just... pop up in his head sometimes, I would say. He acts on them almost immediately and usually teleports to take care of whatever he was reminded of.”

I place my hand on the rail for a moment before we continue up, legs tiring from the height and amount of these stairs. “I wish he would have teleported us up to the floor on which we are staying.”

Wanda turns around and gives a slightly wry smile. “You learn to live with it. It’s actually the next floor, though.”

“It appears much larger on the outside,” I comment, releasing the carved railing to instead saunter up the last few stairs on this flight.

“It does, but the smaller a place is, the cozier it is.” Wanda casually turns to start up the final flight. “I have never been one for mansions and all that. They always felt so... lifeless, to me.”

“Hm. I lived in a palace for my entire life, and you’d be correct in calling it lifeless. Even when it was filled to the brim with feasting Asgardians, it still felt as if there was a lack of spirit within the walls. Perhaps it was just because I was lonely as a child, though.” I place my hands in the pockets of my suit jacket, happy to hop up the last few freaking steps. Wanda and I instead move onto an equally loud wooden floor, and we are faced with a line of doors as well as a corridor that stretches from left to right.

Wanda pauses for just a moment, then starts to the left. “Did you have anyone that you could share your thoughts with?”

“Well, my mother, but she has passed on. There was also one of the fellow Asgardian children with whom she taught me magic. Leah was her name, but we lost track of each other as the years went by.” I heave a sigh at the memories, momentarily rubbing my temple. “Oh, and then there was Thor. I stopped trying to explain my thoughts to him after he refused to stop interrupting me during my most grievous ones.”

We come to the end of the espresso hall, at which is a painting of a sort of gothic still life. It’s oak frame is as intricately carved as the railing. As Wanda ends our trek here, she turns to me, head tilted slightly to the side. “You think a lot.”

“I... I do.” I hadn’t realized it until now, as I finally have ample opportunity to translate my thoughts into vocal words, claims, and statements. There is no judgement, no incessant censure. Blinking, I meet her eyes again. “So, how did you arrive here?”

“Stephen picked me up after the Westview Incident,” she explains in a monotone voice, a tone

which I immediately recognize to be one of suppressed guilt. When she sees my perplexity at that name, though, her mouth draws tightly into a thin line. “I don’t like to talk about it much. You can... search it up on the internet if you’re really curious. It’s one of those things that everyone talks about.”

“Alright.” The pain she emits brings a dejected look to my face. Wanda, however, just smiles again and gestures to the second door in this hall. It unlocks with a click, and then opens with a lingering creak.

“This is your room. I’m right next door, if you ever need anything, or anyone to talk to.” Wanda watches me begin to slowly make my way underneath the doorway, but she does stay slightly back. I brush my fingers along the door’s frame, wandering into the comfort of this dormitory.

It is dimly lit, just as the first floor was, and what little moonlight there is streams in through the large round window at the back of the room. There is a seat beneath that pane as well, probably to support those who enjoy reading by starlight. An antique bookshelf is to the left of me, and so is some equally aged wooden furniture. As I turn to my right, I am met with the king-sized bed that has freshly changed cotton sheets spread onto it. A nightstand rests beside it, holding both an old lamp and open leather journal. The book is unused, but it is still worn, and I find myself reaching out to gently turn its aged pages.

“Out of 14 million possibilities that could be played out, I managed to secure the one where you actually joined us.” The crackling of a portal as well as the sound of a voice bring me back to the present moment, and I turn to see Stephen just as his feet land on the wooden floor. The golden gateway which he used to transport himself in front of my window sparks and fades into the air. Wanda begins to wander further into the room, her motions still hesitant. However, a smile does appear on her face when she sees that Stephen has returned.

A different, more egotistical grin graces my features as I look to the Sorcerer Supreme. “Well, I enjoy defying the odds.”

“Of course you do.” Stephen’s eyes dance in between Wanda and me. “How about we go out and grab something to eat? Celebrate at that 24-hour diner in Upper Greenwich?”

Wanda’s nose crinkles as she smiles in a playful fashion. “Only if you’re paying.”

Chapter 3

For almost 9:00 at night, this corner diner is certainly busy. About eight or so people sit at the barstools that face the mahogany and subway tiled counter, all either working on a device or just sitting and enjoying their warm mugs of coffee. Several waiters move back and forth between customers while carrying plates of hot meals. The lamps overhead repeatedly dim and flicker in sync, and it is as if one of us sorcerers is absentmindedly activating it with our tortured mind. This place holds an overall essence that is sleepless and dull.

Stephen, Wanda, and I sit in a corner booth by the large window pane. My boots scrape across the black and white tiled floor as I lean forward to take hold on my fork. I ordered a simple dish since I am not overly hungry. Just something which the Midgardians call french toast sticks. They are very sweet, and with a touch of maple syrup, they are even sweeter. I indulge in the taste, watching out of the corner of my eye my new companions.

“So, Loki, I hear there aren’t many sorcerers in Asgard.” Stephen’s comment draws my full attention to him, and I glance up at him right as he gestures to me with his own utensil. “What was it like to grow up there under those circumstances?”

Wanda turns her head to me, also curious of my response. So, I breathe in sharply and pick at my food. “It was... difficult. I mean, I did have my mother and several other Asgardian magic students. Amora... Leah... Lorelei... although Lore was never one to favor magic; she just learned to keep up with her sister and such. Sorcery— *seidr* —was never something admired in Asgard, especially as the main talent of a possible future king. I have always assumed that my practices were one of the main reasons that Odin never chose me for the throne.”

“Did you have to hide often?” Wanda asks in a quiet and hesitant voice. There is slight breakage in her accent, and the cone-shaped lamp that hangs above us begins to flicker.

“... Yes.” I let my fork rest against the plate, then I draw my hands up to bridge together in front of myself. “All throughout mine and Thor’s youths, we were constantly subjected to analysis and measurement of our royal qualities. Every instance during which I would use my sorcery, I would essentially be ‘checked’ and lose...”

“Points?” Stephen finishes for me.

“Hm, yes, I suppose that could be the word.” I sigh heavily, my eyes flickering in between Stephen and Wanda. “Regardless, we see how things turned out.”

“Well, you certainly don’t have to worry about hiding your sorcery with us,” Stephen comments, glancing out the window to the sidewalks and backed-up street. The outside world is still dressed in night.

Wanda, however, immediately turns to me again, a gentle smile gracing her features. “Forget sorcery. You don’t have to *hide* with us. I know that’s something you’ve also dealt with.”

“That’s something you two have in common.” Stephen is still fixated on what lies on the other side of this window pane, so much so that I have to follow where his gaze goes. I catch sight of some sort of fast-moving shadow, and immediately after it leaves my line of view, the door to this diner swings open. The bell attached to the top of it rings, and both Wanda and I look over our seat to see who has just entered this place. No one stands near the entrance nor by the counter, but all of the patrons and servers stare quizzically at the door as it closes.

There is nothing but silence for a second or so, then amiable chatter from the customers about a strong gust of wind. The laughter is light and fills the silence that sought to make some believers increasingly nervous. I go to turn back around, but Wanda still looks to the entrance, her irises filled with the color of blood. Stephen begins to stand, hands resting carefully on the table's surface. The cuffs of his blue button up shirt have ancient runes etched into them.

For a moment I swear I can hear the acceleration of my pounding heart. My hands are shaking, and it seems as if my own skin senses the fear in the environment and seeks to crawl away from me to escape it. Just as I go to whip my head towards the entrance for the second time, a neon green light flashes. Glass shatters somewhere behind the counter, and screams of shock subsequently sound.

“Clearly we can’t have even one night that doesn’t host the spirits of evil.” Stephen rushes out of the booth and steps onto the floor. His voice raises once he addresses the scrambling mix of customers and servers. “EVERYBODY, OUT! GO, GO, GO!”

“Is it truly a spirit?” I turn to Wanda to ask, noting the fact that I cannot see this magic wielder among the escaping group of people. Stephen sends the last few patrons out through the glass door that he keeps propped open through his sorcery, then allows it to shut.

Wanda quickly starts out onto the floor as well, blindly motioning for me to follow. “It makes itself appear to be one, but it doesn’t have the thought pattern of one. That makes me think—”

She gasps and clutches her forehead, nearly falling onto the diner floor as she squints her eyes shut. I take hold of her arms and seek to help her back onto her unsteady feet. Stephen looks back at us, confusion dancing along his features. I find myself swallowing as I gently release Wanda, unable to remove my gaze from the Sorcerer Supreme.

“I’m alright,” Wanda tells me, yet her voice is tinged with pain. I finally turn back to face her, watching her slowly stand up straight after a couple uneven breaths. “Dark magic. It... afflicts the minds of telepaths... corrupts them...”

“Then it’s no spirit, that’s for sure.” Stephen glances around, searching for some sign of this being. “After all, dark magic has to be learned.”

Wanda breathes in sharply, drawing my uncertain gaze towards her equally unsure features. “Its thoughts are... jumbled. I couldn’t understand even one behind the magic.”

“I could try to creep into the mind of this being,” I suggest to Stephen with the shrug of my shoulders. “Dabble around in its thoughts... Find a motive...”

“Absolutely not.” Stephen looks at me sternly from across the diner, his gaze more serious than I could ever be. It catches me slightly off guard, and I find myself tilting my head slightly to the side in response.

Stephen just turns and continues to look around, his hands out by his sides. “No mind magic with this. We can’t have anyone becoming corrupt. We just have to draw it out and capture it, because I’m certain it’s some sort of demon or some obscure and hellish being.”

The lights above us begin to flicker, as do the lamps that hang above the counter and booths. The on and off radiance is captivating in all the wrong ways, and it sends a sort of chill down my spine. Wanda purses her lips, gaze darkening at this elusive threat.

I just look to Stephen. “I don’t think it liked that.”

“No shit,” he remarks in return.

“Um, boys...” Wanda just idly points to behind the counter, drawing all of our gazes to the cluster of shadow that exists behind it. That shadow takes the shape of a human, a *person*, but the fact is overshadowed by yet another green flash. Wanda and I quickly duck, but Stephen just waves his calloused hands to conjure a sparking golden portal. I rise with caution, my eyes following that portal as it is cast towards the shadow being. Stephen’s magic dissolves even before the entity makes contact with it, causing Wanda to appear slightly alarmed.

The lights shut off, so I whip my head around to glance at Stephen again through the heavy darkness. “It appears they didn’t like that, either.”

He audibly groans, drawing his hand up to his face. Beside me, Wanda rises off her feet and into the air, her stance one that shows she is prepared for combat against this force. She begins to wave into her palms a ball of red and sparking light, a physical manifestation of her inner energy. The sorcery brings a careful crimson radiance into this darkened diner.

The Scarlet Witch looks down at Stephen and me, raising an eyebrow. “I’d appreciate it if you two would help.”

“Right.” I immediately reel back and fall into a combative stance, extending my palms to better maneuver my seidr. Stephen jogs to join me, and the three of us huddle together whilst maintaining eye contact with this entity of complete shadow.

I glance to either side of me, smirking at this formation. “Look at that! We are already assembling like some sort of team! The New Avengers: Sorcerer Edition!”

“That’s a *terrible* name,” Stephen responds with a sigh.

“I second that,” Wanda adds with equal fatigue.

“Eh, we’ll figure something out.”

The shadow’s humanlike outline begins to warble, and I, among others, finally remember the threat currently at hand. The being begins to repeatedly extend and draw in their hands, sending towards us streams of dark energy. Wanda in turn sends forward her own channeled energy, and Stephen and I seek to dodge both powerful types of magic. After making sure to escape the trail of stray dark magic, I cast forth a couple green streams of my own. Stephen follows, gritting his teeth as he emits one manifestation of energy after another. The mix of concentration and desperation on his face seeks to make my heart skip a beat, but I quickly remind myself of the task at hand.

The shadow is repeatedly hit and noticeably weakened by our attacks, which is another factor that causes me to nearly stop my efforts. Wanda notices it as well, and she begins to lower herself back onto solid ground.

“Wait.” She raises her right hand to signal Stephen to pause as well. The shadow flickers and seems to struggle to remain on this plane of existence, a gasp escaping their nonexistent mouth. Stephen lowers his arms, starting to step forward in a slow and cautious manner.

Just as he makes it to the edge of the counter, I watch the shadow begin to spark and sputter. The change in energy causes my eyes to slightly widen, as I know exactly how unpredictable pent-up dark magic can be. There could be a blast zone, in which Stephen is most likely currently standing.

So, with the quick descent of my hands to my sides, I cast a forcefield around us three sorcerers. Not even a second later, the shadow emits such a powerful blast of dark magic that the entire diner is torn apart. The windows are shattered, and any bulbs or other glass items shatter amidst this

terrible explosion. Stephen ducks back further towards the center of this shield, and Wanda just watches, absolutely shocked.

The smoke and dust clears, revealing that the entity has disappeared. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the being is still out there somewhere, and I allow my warbling and green tinted shield to fall with hesitance. Once it does, I glance around at the destruction, blinking repeatedly. Silence reigns in this aftermath now.

“Well, this is... not how I wanted this night to end...” Stephen sighs heavily and runs his hand through his hair.

“I guess we should grab coffee on the way back?” Wanda suggests as a question, her hands now by her sides.

“Yep, because we’re in for a long couple hours of briefing and theorizing.” Stephen turns to me, his gray eyes mimicking the appearance of the smoke that clears around this battered diner. “I hope you weren’t planning on sleeping.”

“I don’t sleep much to begin with anyway,” I return dully. The aftermath of this little fight continues to smolder around us, and I spare half a glance to a couple of etched symbols in what is left of the subway tile counters. I am still slightly shaken, as this was the last thing I expected to happen during an innocent and celebratory outing.

But, when do things ever go as planned?

Chapter 4

It is now just a little bit past ten o'clock, and the three of us are in the center of the library with the vast stairwell not far ahead of us. Shelves of old leather-bound books surround us, and the scent of their aged pages persists. Their presence is still just as tempting as it was earlier, but I am aware that we have more dire matters at hand, matters that make my desire to indulge in reading seem entirely too selfish. So, my eyes dance between the dark wooden floor and the holographic display before me.

The recreation of the diner scene is tinged in the signature orange hue that Stephen's sorcery holds. It rotates in a slow and mesmerizing manner, yet its contents are frozen in time. The 3D image remains one of just seconds before the explosion, and Stephen has been moving the time forward as well as backward in minuscule increments. Nothing of importance has been found by any of us, though. The shadow flickers, then the dark magic causes the whole place to blow. That is as much as this display will show.

"Alright, so the things we *do* know are that the being has to be some sort of person, *and* that they have uncontrolled dark magic." Stephen pinches the bridge of his nose as he stands in between Wanda and me. He is now dressed in his usual blue ensemble and his sentient red cloak, and his grey eyes are fixated on the scene he has replicated for us to look at. It was an interesting technique, the one which he used to capture the essence of the diner. I can only describe it as some sort of 'sorcery snapshot', as before we left, he illuminated the whole place in an orange glow with just the wave of his hands. Once he lifted that luminescence, he was able to hold this direct holographic copy in his calloused and trembling palms. I watched him do so, intrigued by his every movement as we stood amongst some mild rubble that was composed mostly of glass shards.

"Loki." The stating of my name draws me back to reality, and I meet the Sorcerer Supreme's smoke-like eyes. He raises an eyebrow at me, and I raise both of mine in return, drawing yet another groan of annoyance from his taut mouth. Wanda watches with slight amusement, a calm flicker of a smile on her pale face.

"I asked if you had any insight, but I'm assuming you don't," Stephen says sarcastically.

"You assumed correctly. Just because I'm a god doesn't mean I have a clue." I scoff, folding my arms across my chest. My eyes only momentarily focus on the holographic scene again, as I am more focused on other art.

"I think this might be a case that none of us have experience with," Wanda suggests with the wave of her hand. "Maybe we're in new territory of sorts."

Stephen ponders on that idea for a moment, his curiosity appearing in his expression. But he shakes his head and dismisses it. "Maybe, but something tells me the opposite."

Wanda and I look to each other, both weighing our current options. The display continues to rotate and glow, its presence now possibly more haunting than the being itself. As if he sensed my train of thoughts, Stephen casts the hologram away with the rise of his open palm. He then lets his arm fall and glances in between Wanda and me.

"You two can turn in for the night if you want. I'm gonna look over some old news articles for any similar incidents, although I'm sure I would've heard about them." The Sorcerer sighs, starting in the direction of the stairwell. His movements are swift and captivate me once again for a moment or so, but I turn to Wanda before I lose myself entirely to my new surroundings. She smiles mildly,

visibly tired despite the coffee she had.

“Don’t worry. Stephen just feels that he has to solve everything the night it occurs,” she tells me quietly, brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Hm. I used to be that way once. Time with the TVA quelled that fire, though.” I smile at Wanda, straightening in a proud manner. “Which is why I feel little to no guilt about heading to bed.”

I am standing amongst darkness with gravel black as night at my aching feet. The veins of this planet hold a blue glow to them, a hue that reminds me of the blotches that peek out from my own pale skin. Dull and burning pains afflict my entire body, and I can’t walk without limping immensely. I don’t even remember the last time I slept, the last time I ate. I can’t even breathe without difficulty, so those two necessities become of less meaning to me.

A large creature with numerous ridges on its body swims through space above me, emitting a terrifying cry as it sweeps by. I watch it with trembling hands, feeling the need to either fight or fly my way out of here. But I have learned that both of those options will get me nowhere in this terrifying atmosphere. So, I numbly gaze above, my legs beginning to feel unsteady. Sounds of collapsing structures echo in the distance, and my breath begins to stop short, as I am plagued by intense shaking again.

Exhausted, I turn around, coming face to face with the titan who is the cause of my suffering. He stands tall, his skin and irises an intense shade of purple. There is no expression on his face other than smug joy, and I am shaken to the core by how much he indulges in my weakness. I try to stumble backwards, but he grabs hold of my arm with a relentless grip. My instinct is to fight and struggle, although I feel as if I have too little energy to do either.

Instead, I collapse to my knees, taunted by the strong desire to curl up into a fetal position. Thanos takes hold of my unkempt hair, though, and forces me to gaze up directly at him. Now my breathing is rapid, ragged, and I feel as if my vision is clouding in my eyes.

Thanos just grins, his eyes alight with a certain, menacing glee. “And you call yourself a god.”

I awake with a gasp and immediately sit up, tangled underneath the sheets of this unfamiliar bed. In a hurry, I throw the blankets off of me, fearing their hold will only remind me of Thanos’ harsh grip on my aching wrist. Although, the exact arm which he grabbed in my nightmare is afflicted with a throbbing right now, as if I was momentarily transported back to the memory while I slept. I gingerly massage the aching limb, my breathing still entirely too rapid.

After a few moments, I begin to carefully step onto the wooden floor of this bedroom. Darkness hides the majority of the room from me, and it causes mundane and ordinary objects to seem like imminent threats to my untrustworthy eyes. My legs are equally unsteady in the real world as they were in the dream world, so I am careful among the array of troubles with which I am faced. The door to the corridor beckons me forth, so I blink a couple of times, then make my way towards it.

After quietly slipping through, I shut it with just as much care. My head turns to either side of me to gaze into the darkness of this ancient hall, and I momentarily focus on Wanda’s closed door. A part of me wants to take up her previous offer and share my troubles with her, but another part of me is afraid to bother her. So, I instead direct my gaze to the steps, then I decide to make my descent. My feet carry me almost automatically down the numerous flights of intricately carved stairs.

Once I come to the foyer and first floor, I look back at the dining hall behind me. Its large oak doors are still held open, but there is no visible sign of life inside. So, I move down the main staircase and set course for the area to the left of it, which is where a lamp on a nightstand emits a dull glow. I see a person sitting in an armchair beside the table, and as I move onto the wooden floor, I get a better view of him. Stephen doesn't notice me, though, and instead pores over numerous newspaper articles.

At least I think he doesn't notice me. Just seconds after I appear in his vicinity, he speaks without even glancing up from the columns in his hands. "It's three in the morning. You *do* sleep on Asgard, don't you?"

"I used to, a long time ago." I pause, my hand resting on the railing even though I am merely beside the stairs. "Now? Not so much."

"Sometimes, I think that's how it goes for everyone. Once you get past the innocence of childhood, sleep isn't the same." Stephen sets the papers down in his lap and turns his head to gaze at me. "So? What was it that made you get up?"

"Nightmares."

"About?"

A sigh escapes my parted lips. "I think you know."

Stephen observes me for a moment, quizzical in his expression. Then he shakes his head with a mild and dry sort of laugh before gazing up again.

"You don't wanna tell me about it because you don't trust me enough yet. That's 'one of your things'," he concludes, and he is partially correct. "You don't share things with people unless you trust them completely."

"Well, yes, but..." The corner of my mouth quirks up. "I trust you."

This causes a sort of pause in our conversation. Stephen sets the newspapers onto the table beside him, then he looks to me again. "Are you gonna share?"

"I would... rather not, actually, but not because I don't trust you. I do, I swear. I just... would prefer to try to forget the incident. You know how it goes. You feel something and try to immediately seer it out of your brain, even if that means never thinking about it again." I cautiously view him, nervously raising an eyebrow.

"That sounds unhealthy," Stephen returns blandly.

"Maybe, but it is the only way I can move on."

"It doesn't sound like you're moving on, though," Stephen challenges as he stands up from his armchair. "I mean, you're still dreaming about him, and it's obvious that you suffer from some sort of trauma from everything that happened. You can't get over trauma by trying to ignore it."

I don't immediately respond, and I instead breathe in sharply. Stephen turns to properly face me, moving away from the chair. The two of us are trapped in each other's eyes and frozen due to the severity of our stares. It is as if I exist for him, and he exists for me. The ideation is simultaneously a selfish and selfless desire.

Yet I break the intimate silence with a question that has been in the front of my mind since I awoke.

“Could I... lend a hand, at all? With the articles you’re searching through?”

“If you want. We can move to the dining hall and look at them together, so I can fuel your unhealthy coping mechanisms.” There is a slight tinge of amusement in Stephen’s eyes and features, and the emotion resonates through me as well.

I return with equal playfulness. “Don’t pretend like you won’t try to help *me* , too.”

“Yeah, help you get a therapist. I’m a neurosurgeon, or I was. I don’t do psychiatrics.” Stephen grabs the papers from the table, then starts past me. I stand there for a moment, a calm smile still on my face, then I turn and watch Stephen walk up the main staircase. Despite my inability to sleep peacefully, I am strangely alive in the comfort of this house. I don’t think I have ever felt safer around people before, and I have never been able to recognize that safety so quickly. Maybe I’m finally changing in a way that is naturally good.

Chapter 5

Morning comes bearing little consequences to our sleepless night, and our trio sits in the comfort of the dining hall. The lengthy round table is beautifully carved and of dark wooden material, holding on its surface numerous breakfast foods and drinks. I have a fine piece of china with a few strips of bacon on it, as well as some scrambled eggs. My antique mug has black coffee inside. Above us, a chandelier gleams and glimmers with sparkling light.

On the wall closest to the end at which we sit is a flatscreen television, which is probably the most out of place item in this building. Everything else is either vintage or styled to be vintage, yet here is one very glaring piece of modern technology. Still, I can see it has use, as a news channel is currently alive on the screen. The reporter is at the scene of the diner and stands in front of it with her large microphone in hand. People pass by behind her on the sidewalk, not even sparing glances to the windowless restaurant.

“—And we have just received report of another similar attack that happened a few blocks down and much later into the night. Whoever caused this left behind no evidence besides this strange symbol, which has been unidentifiable by both the NYPD and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” The picture switches from real time to a mere snapshot of the symbol that I only glanced at last night. This news channel has increased both the size and detail, allowing me to recognize the symbol as a rare Asgardian rune. It is known only to those who have the gift of seidr.

My reaction is one of immediate shock, and I stand up almost too abruptly. Wanda and Stephen turn from gazing at the television to looking curiously at me instead. My hands remain trembling, and I have to put them flat on the table’s surface to try and quell that shakiness.

“I need a pen and paper.” I am not sure why I say this aloud when I just conjure both those items seconds later. Regardless, I raise both of my hands and reach into my very own pocket dimension, and moments after, a pencil is held by the fingers of my right hand, and a leather journal is held by the palm of my left.

“Loki, if you have something to share—”

I interrupt Stephen with a shush, then I take a seat and hastily open the journal to the next clean page. Both of the fellow sorcerers resign themselves to silence and idly watch me sketch. My pencil travels across the lined paper with an intense sort of speed and fervor, and I find myself almost getting lost in the depiction of this powerful symbol. My skin becomes tinged with electricity, and ancient words seem to be spoken to me by beings whom I cannot see. I feel my own eyes widen with wildness while I complete the last few jagged lines of this sketch. Once I am finished, it takes great strength to take my eyes from it.

“This symbol,” I begin, dropping my pencil so that I can gaze up at Wanda and Stephen. “is the key to everything.”

Wanda tilts her head slightly to the side, visibly confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I explained that in Asgard, our sorcery is called seidr. And in Asgard, our seidr is derived from the runes of the Vanir, meaning, yes, the magic is essentially stolen, but that is simply how it is. Without the runes of the Vanir, none of us would have become magic wielders.” My own excitement thrills me, bringing life to my usually calm features. “But the Aesir and Vanir always draw their runes differently. The Vanir keep them more... flowy, if you will, while the Aesir’s runes look to be carved with a dagger. The Asgardians’ runes would look exactly like this.”

I hold up the open book, allowing Stephen and Wanda to view what I have sketched. Wanda's eyes widen, yet Stephen remains trapped in a silent awe. His mouth is open ever so slightly as he comes to the same realization that I arrived at five minutes ago.

He meets my gaze with caution. "So this person we're after is Asgardian?"

"Precisely, and one of the few who practices magic." I proudly sit back and place my book down on the table's surface.

"That narrows it down perfectly." Stephen breathes a relieved sigh.

"Now all we have to do is wait for another attack..." The thought brings a grimace to Wanda's face, and she looks down at her food with mild distaste. Clearly, she has lost her appetite at the thought of endangering more people.

"If I had the Time Stone, that wouldn't be a problem, but I can't tell the future anymore." Stephen is also afflicted by this loss of morale. I can tell by the defeat that sounds in his voice.

"We may not be able to predict the future, but surely we can make some guesses. These attacks are sporadic and in public places. So," I push my plate forward so that I can pretzel my arms on the table. "why don't you two bring me along on a tour of someplace in this fine city, and we can be prepared for anything that may happen along the way."

"I do have to buy presents for both of you for the holidays," Wanda returns, seeming on board with my idea.

"So do I," Stephen adds. "We could run to the mall or something."

"Why don't we? I'm not certain what that is, but it sounds promising." I sport a grin.

Wanda quirks an eyebrow, equally amused as she begins to stand. "You will catch up. First, I've got to get dressed."

The moment we step into the vast and bustling building, I am stricken with awe. The array of stores with which I am faced is overwhelming, and it seems that there is a shop for just about anything under the sun. Countless shoppers travel in groups and carry bags on their arms and wrists, basking underneath the skylights that hang distantly above. There is another floor above this one, and people use escalators and stairs to make their way up there. I watch them leisurely move while I remain frozen in time, strangely wild-eyed.

"I don't know what I was expecting," I say quietly, unable to tear my gaze from the stores and people on either side of me.

"Yep, it's a trip. Wanda, show him around. I have to pick up a few things." Stephen begins to wander ahead, swift in his motions.

"We're splitting up?" Wanda directs her question to him as he walks ahead.

The sorcerer momentarily turns to face us again. "For now. We can meet back at the food court around three."

"Got it."

Stephen disappears into the mess of pedestrians, and his absence resonates as a slight flutter in my heart. A desire to join him in his endeavors, to follow him like a lost dog in this unfamiliar atmosphere. But I quell those thoughts by rolling the tip of my fingers against the nail of my thumb. Maybe I can use this opportunity to find a gift for him.

I turn to Wanda and notice her amused gaze. She just laughs and gestures for me to follow her as she starts to join the flow of fellow shoppers. The two of us begin to wander, and I remain captivated by all that surrounds me, from unreliable fluorescence to different store aesthetics. Each time I glance around, I find something new to be impressed by. Although, the stares of other shoppers do divert me from my fantasies.

Wanda just nudges me. "Ignore them. Come on, we're stopping in here."

It takes me a moment to rip my gaze from the scene of cautious and suspicious shoppers, but once I do, I turn and follow Wanda into what seems to be a card store. However, displays of various knickknacks are scattered about, mostly themed after the Midgardian holiday of Christmas. Ornaments and miniature pine trees are some of the most common items, as well as candy canes. A check out counter is in the center of the store, and a few employees chat with customers there. It seems to be a cute little shop, one that is centered around gift giving.

I place my hands in the pockets of my sweatshirt. "I'm not even sure where to begin."

"Well, I will grab my gifts first. Promise you won't peek when I pick out something for you," Wanda asks of me with a playful smile.

"Only if you promise the same," I return coyly. She shakes her head with a laugh, then the two of us begin to walk further into the store.

As we amble about, Wanda turns to me with a curious question. "Did you have malls in Asgard?"

"No. We had markets, though," I answer, removing my hands from my pockets to pick up a little Christmas trinket. "For as much as we pride ourselves to be above you all, we are very behind technologically."

Wanda laughs, examining a stack of DVDs that stands beside the display through which I am searching. "I understand. I think malls and markets are both charming in their own ways."

"I agree." I watch her eyes light up as she comes across the first season of what reads *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. "Speaking of charming... What are you buying for Stephen?"

"I guess you mean 'what can *you* buy for Stephen'," Wanda returns, scrunching up her nose in a playful manner.

"...Well, yes."

"Exactly what I thought. I see the way you look at him. Good thing for you is he's pansexual." Wanda smiles knowingly as the scenery of the store drones on around her.

"Another thing we have in common. That's relieving." I allow a smile to grace my face as well, now.

Wanda's grin, however, falls. "Unfortunately, he is more difficult to shop for."

"How so?"

“He likes things that are practical, things that have purpose. He isn’t exactly the ‘sentimental’ type.” Wanda’s expression remains on the line between a frown and indifference, but her uncertainty doesn’t scare me.

“Everyone is at least a *bit* sentimental,” I say, sure of that fact.

“Well, if you do want to get him something sentimental, I wouldn’t buy it from here. I actually have another place in mind.” Wanda waves for me to follow her yet again, leaving behind the disc she had been looking at. I mentally note its name, prepared to come back and quickly buy it once we are finished with Stephen’s gift. Until then, I maintain a saunter, already priding myself on whatever Wanda and I will choose for the Sorcerer Supreme. I’m not just fixated on his reaction, but also Wanda’s, as her gift will have as much meaning as Stephen’s. My excitement to give her gift might be resigned to just the joy of friendship, but it is no less powerful than the joy of newly found infatuation.

Chapter 6

The holidays at the Sanctum end up being spent on the first floor in the early dawn. The day ends up being centered around gift giving and the general arrival of winter, seeing as each of us celebrates something different. It still remains a joyous occasion, though.

The three of us sit in the area beside the main staircase, with Wanda and I on the couch, and Stephen seated in the armchair. Numerous gifts remain unopened around us, excluding both Wanda's gift to Stephen and Stephen's gift to Wanda. My presents for them both are in my lap, and I find my eyes darting in between my friends as I try to imagine their reactions. Underneath the staircase is a pine tree that has been adorned with blinking lights and freshly fallen snow (thanks to Wanda's reality magic). The ornaments that hang from its branches catch in the light and reflect a special kind of radiance this morning.

Wanda turns and hands me a medium sized box that is wrapped in bright red paper. "Here's yours, Loki."

"Thank you." I smile gratefully, then glance down at the box. Carefully, I start to tear and remove the paper that covers it. Once I toss that aside, I am left with a white box, which I pull the lid off of. What seems to be a camera is inside, and it is of a striking mint green color. Stephen leans forward in his armchair, intrigued by the gift.

"It's a Polaroid. I figured you might find some joy in taking photos." Wanda sits up a bit straighter, hands in her lap.

I place the lid back on the box and set it down on the floor. Then, I face her again with visible glee. "It means a lot to me, Wanda. Thank you. I hope yours can be just as enjoyable."

Maintaining a mild smile, I hand Wanda her small present. The DVD is merely wrapped in green paper, but she takes it in her hands with equal thanks. I watch her open it with care, and the moment she sees the title, her face lights up. There is a childlike sort of wonder in her eyes as she throws the paper aside and holds the disc up to her.

"That's her favorite show," Stephen tells me, crossing his arms over his chest. "Good pick."

"This is... wonderful!" Wanda laughs and looks up at me. "Thank you, Loki!"

"Of course." My eyes then flicker to Stephen, who has stood and is walking towards me with his present for me in hand. It is in a small bright red bag, and I reach up to take hold of it with care. Something about it feels familiar as I reach for its contents. It is a piece of jewelry, a necklace that is silver and has jewels of sapphire blue.

As I hold the necklace in my palms and fingers, I look up at Stephen again. "My mother's necklace... How did you— How did you even—?"

"I... dabbled with some sorcery. I know you two were close." Stephen gives a rare genuine smile, then takes from my hold the gift that I wrapped for him. I am so speechless that I barely even comprehend the fact, and Wanda watches me observe this treasure with such care.

Stephen walks back over to his armchair and takes a seat, having already torn off most of the paper. He turns the frame of the gift around, eyeing it without any indication of how he feels. I finally gaze up, mouth slightly hanging open until I quickly shut it.

Stephen's grey eyes dance along the picture, and he rotates it again to show it to Wanda. It is a depiction of a cluster of stars and constellations with the date 6/16/23 directly below. Stephen immediately recognizes that date's importance. "It's the night sky from the night we defeated Thanos. That's..."

"I know you're not one for sentiment, but I couldn't help it." I open my arms and shrug, having deposited the necklace in my lap. Wanda watches me, the corner of her mouth quirked.

"No, with an occasion like this one, I don't mind sentiment." Stephen's mild smile returns, and I find myself sporting a similar expression of hidden merriment. It seems that for just a moment, the two of us are getting through to each other, forcing each other to be vulnerable underneath this yuletide light. Yet the doorbell rings and causes all three of us to turn our attention to the grand entrance.

Thor has a habit of ruining every single one of my moments, and this one with Stephen is no exception. So, I am not the least bit shocked when my brother walks into the foyer after throwing open the door. "Merry tidings, friends!"

"Thor," Stephen greets with a smile. While the tone is more matter-of-fact, it is still evident of mild joy. Beside me, Wanda lifts her coffee mug and takes a sip from it, her eyes lighting up at my brother's presence. I simply turn my gaze to the thunder god, beginning to stand right after I wave Mother's necklace into my own personal pocket dimension. The only place it will truly remain safe. After all, I don't want Thor to see it. He'd become teary-eyed, and I'd regrettably become inclined to give the jewelry to him as a Yuletide gift.

No sooner after I brush my plaid pajama pants off does Thor rush over and throw his arms around me. It catches me off guard, even though it surely shouldn't by now, and I let escape from me a barely audible squeak before the oaf crushes me further. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Wanda stifle a laugh with the palm of her hand. Stephen just stares, amusement in his eyes.

Thor finally releases me after a couple more seconds of agony. He looks me up and down, amazement gracing his lively features. "Strange told me you were here! I did not believe it at first, but then I realized the apartment you had looked at had been sold to a lovely couple who was shocked to see me in their home, and I supposed he was telling the truth!"

"So proud of you for using context clues." I smile at him, and although I did not set out for the expression to contain depth, it is as deep as the endless sea. "Was the couple alright at least?"

"Oh yes, after I explained the situation, they were very amiable. The one woman even spoke very highly of you. The other woman, well, not so much, but she did say she admired your style!"

"Lovely," I say, and my brother pays me on the back as a response.

"Why don't you sit down with us?" Wanda suggests, patting the open seats beside her on the couch.

"Oh! Thank you, my friend." Thor immediately makes his way to sit beside the sorcerer, leaving me to stand idly for a moment before I take a seat at the end of the couch. Whereas myself, Wanda, and Stephen all have drinks on old coasters, Thor is without any beverage, so Stephen waves his hand and conjures a jug of mead in my brother's hand. Thor looks at it with surprise, but the emotion quickly melts into appreciation. I raise an eyebrow, aware of how interesting this will become.

By the third refill on the mead, as I expected and calculated, my brother has fallen into a drunken stupor that is mainly focused on nostalgia. Fortunately, we are collectively a nostalgic group, though, and each one of us longs for a past that is now far behind us. Even Stephen, who is the Sorcerer Supreme, claims to at times secretly wish for a return to his life before the accident. As he states this with mild regret, I listen intently, feeling as if this is the most intimate thing I know about Stephen.

“It’s interesting, really, how people like us long for a quote unquote normal life,” Stephen concludes, watching the barely noticeable way his resting hand trembles.

“And those confined to the mundane long for a life of adventure,” I finish.

“Hm.” Wanda sips from her coffee again, mildly bitter yet still in agreement.

I begin to speak my thoughts and continue my analysis. “Perhaps the latter was me. After all, being a god was the norm for me. But, I was lonely, and any journey that would have given me friends would have been a journey I was on board with.”

“You had friends, Brother!” Thor responds with unwavering confidence as he turns to me. “You had myself...”

I don’t comment on his frequent absences and his exclusion of me from his warrior friend group.

“... And that one sorceress! What was her name, though, Long black hair, kind of blunt at times...”

“Leah,” I interrupt.

“Yes! Leah!” Thor sets his empty glass of mead on the table beside him. “You two were very close, right?”

“Yeah, you do mention her quite a lot,” Stephen comments, causing Wanda to nod in silent agreement. “More than Amora.”

“That’s because Amora and I were on and off. We were either friends, something more, or something less.” I sigh heavily, directing my gaze to the wooden floors. “Leah and I were always friends, no matter the circumstances. Never anything more, but certainly never anything less. I often wonder where she is today. Hopefully not in Late Asgard.”

“You have a multiverse of possibilities ahead of you now, Loki.” Stephen eyes lock with mine as he remains seated in his antique armchair. That flutter in my heart makes itself known again. “You could always search for her.”

Wanda looks from me next, leaning forward as to see me without my brother’s shadow dwelling on me. “If I have learned anything from my life, it’s that meaningful relationships are rare and can make you feel the best you have ever felt. Please, at least try to look for her.”

“I... I suppose you’re both right. It is almost New Year’s, correct? Perhaps I can... make some resolutions.” I absentmindedly pick at the skin on the palm of my left hand, shaking in a slight and barely noticeable manner. The thought of reconnecting, of opening Schrödinger’s Box to find if Leah is alive or had died in the Fall of Asgard, is something that strikes fear into my very core. Yet at the same time, there is an underlying sense of longing there, of which I had previously spoken. The high that accompanies vulnerability is something to be discreetly desired.

A gentle smile graces my face, and I finally appreciate the air that I breathe in.

Chapter 7

It is nighttime when the group finally parts, and I wander up to my quarters with both intent and a sketchbook in hand. By lamplight, while sitting atop the soft sheets and blankets on my bed, I examine the sketches I made of that Asgardian rune that appeared on the counter of the diner. The pencil is lighter than I had hoped for it to be, and slightly hard to see with such darkness invading this room, but I manage through continuously squinting.

I trace my fingers along the lines of the rune, overwhelmed by a sudden wave of nostalgia. Or maybe it wasn't so sudden, but rather gradual in a way that I didn't notice it until just now. The feeling taunts me through memories so ancient that they feel akin to dreams. Whereas one moment I am staring at the pages of my sketchbook, the next I am once again part of the past. It is jarring, yet oddly comforting.

Ages Ago

The grassy fields near Asgard's school make the campus truly beautiful. A few picnic tables can be found around cobblestone trails, and countless students lounge underneath the shade that the oak trees provide. The stone buildings of the school are tall, dark, and gothic, yet they gleam so beautifully in the mid-afternoon sun. I find myself absentmindedly staring at the aesthetic of my current whereabouts while I remain seated against the trunk of a willow tree, branch in my limp hand. Leah is directly across from me, struggling to get through to me with her teaching strategies.

"Alright, so it's just a simple spell. Just hold the branch." Leah holds out her hands as she sits pretzel-legged across from me. With the flick of her wrist, the branch I'm holding changes into a snake. I should've known, seeing as she stole her mischievous skill set from none other than me.

"LEAH!" I scream and jump back, watching the small serpent travel through the dirt and grass. Until it slithers away completely, I stay standing, terrified to move even a muscle despite my rapid breathing. Leah watches me with amusement, then grabs my hand to pull me back to the ground.

"I never knew you were so deathly afraid of snakes," Leah notes, brushing her lengthy black hair behind her ear. It spills over her shoulders like a rushing waterfall, making her pale features stand out as a moon against a midnight sky.

"That's due to the myths that surround me. Snake poison is apparently a weakness of mine." I scowl at the thought of that slimy thing coming anywhere near me. "Can you please show me the actual spell now? Before I fail this exam and have to become a theatrical sorcerer?"

"Oh, please. You're a better sorcerer than I am, and that's an obvious fact. If anything, you're too powerful." Leah's gaze darkens, but the corner of her mouth tilts up. "You just need to focus and control that power."

She picks up another branch and then takes my hands in hers. "Close your eyes. All you have to do is change this branch into a pencil. Use the resource you have to craft a new one."

My eyelids flutter shut, and I turn my left hand in a circular motion, focusing my energy on the fallen twig. I picture nightfallen forests dressed in moonlight and rain, the beauty of the ancient Vanir and the fire pits around which they sing. The scenes from the plays of my mind amplify my connection to my craft and bring about a crackling which has a source in my veins. As soon as I open my eyes again, I see the branch shimmer with fleeting green magic before it changes its form.

A pencil lies before me now, and I take it in my hand with a grin.

“See? You can cast all those illusions of yourself, so this is easy!” Leah takes the pencil from me and changes it back to a mere twig with the turn of her hands. Her green eyes meet mine for just a moment, but it’s almost everything to me, as her friendship is more valuable to me than she may ever understand. It’s rare that someone has such unending confidence in me—the feat is limited to about three people, Leah included.

She smiles at me, slightly prideful in my achievement. “You should take up duplication casting. I think it would suit your mischief.”

“Do you practice duplication casting?” I ask curiously.

“Naturally. Your mother is quite skilled in it, actually.” Leah straightens at the mention of my mother, whom she counts as one of her few role models.

“Then perhaps I will ask her to share her knowledge with me,” I conclude.

“I’m sure that she’ll love having more than one Loki around.”

“Do you mean that honestly?”

Leah breaks into a grin. “Of course I mean that honestly! You’re one of a kind in the best way; who wouldn’t want more than one of you around?”

I had never expected to hear anything resembling those words in my entire life, yet here they were, clear as day and being spoken by a girl who isn’t even family. I often wonder what my life would’ve been like if I had heard those words or similar ones more often. Would they be as memorable? Feel as rewarding? Maybe not, but there is always the possibility that they would.

Now

The feeling of euphoria lingers after I remember the moment I am currently a part of. It causes my mind to be fuzzy, my thoughts to stray to a more self-indulgent path. Yet I don’t reprimand myself. Instead, I allow Hedonism to prosper, and I close my journal before setting it down beside me on the bed.

Just seconds after I let my eyelids momentarily flutter shut, the sound of an explosion causes panic to ensheathe my body. Only the sound of my rapidly beating heart can be heard after the probable fallout, and I find myself carefully opening my eyes and glancing around the dark room. Outside the window, a fire can be seen in a couple of apartment buildings across the street. I slowly stand, wandering over to the round window to get a better view of the raging flame. A neon green intermixed with its bright orange hue, and I begin to realize that this must be another attack. Pedestrians rush away from the scene, some scrambling for cover behind cars or other curbside things. I just swallow, aware of what has to be done.

It is almost as if my mind becomes detached from my body, instead floating beside it or above it as I rush out into the hall. Wanda’s and Stephen’s voices can already be heard from downstairs, yet I don’t register what they say. I simply start down the staircase, falling into a rush as I conquer the many flights that this house has. Stephen meets me halfway down the last flight, his scarlet cloak on along with his regular fighting ensemble. He runs his hand through his hair, then gazes up at me with perplexity. In response, my face becomes heated.

“Another attack. Are you going out there in your pajamas, or...?” His voice trails off, and Wanda comes into view behind him, irises a bright crimson color. She gives me a quick smile to

acknowledge my presence.

“Right.” I wave my right hand and change my outfit to one that I haven’t worn in ages. Half a horned and golden helmet clings to more of my face than my head, and a green overcoat with a fur neck and gold accents remains over my scaled ivy tunic. Black boots nearly blend in with my identically colored pants. I admire my ensemble for just a moment, then look to Stephen and Wanda with open arms and a grin.

Stephen just sighs, then turns and starts down the remaining stairs. “Don’t get too excited.”

Chapter 8

The street is flooded with a kind of chaos that has not been properly cultivated. Instead, the entity emerged as a defense mechanism, as spontaneous as the force that brought about its existence. As a harbinger of chaos myself, I am no stranger to a feeling such as this, but I still can't shake the jarring feeling that comes with its raw formation.

The moment the three of us hit the streets, we are welcomed by the sirens and screams that pierce through the chilled air. The building across from us is still aflame, and I can feel its heat even from far away. Yet that is not the only energy I can feel. Seidr, the kind that roots itself in bones and blood, seeps into the atmosphere. It is intoxicating for even those who are merely witnesses to it.

Without looking to the sorcerers who stand on either side of me, I breathe in sharply and speak. "It's the same person. The same Asgardian."

"Their energy is strong," Wanda comments, and I almost wonder if she's been sifting through my thoughts again until I remember that she too possesses an insanely strong kind of magic. A magic that would connect her to seidr in a way similar to my own.

"Well." Stephen raises his arms and creates dual glowing circles that spread from his closed fists. "Ours is just going to have to be stronger."

"What's our plan?" I ask him warily, watching out of the corner of my eye as Wanda accesses her sorcery.

"Wanda, start by driving the authorities away with your mind control." Stephen drops his magic shields the moment alarm rises in Wanda's eyes. He instead walks to face her, ignoring the sounds of sirens in the tortured air. "I know you don't do that stuff anymore, but this is for their own safety. Otherwise, they'll be torn to shreds by dark magic."

"I..." Wanda looks him up and down, then closes her mouth to nod. "Alright."

She starts off towards the right, where the fire trucks are just beginning to pull up. The two of us watch her jog over there, then witness her regretfully tamper with their fragile minds. Her face is blank, but hundreds of emotions hide beneath the surface of her stone features.

"What about me?" I turn to Stephen to ask.

"This person is Asgardian. I want you to take them on while I secure this area of the universe. Dark magic weakens the areas between dimensions." Stephen's stare is serious and sends a slight flutter through my heart. "If you need backup, Wanda and I will fall in."

I swallow. "Are you absolutely certain of this?"

Stephen reaches out to me, his hand grasping onto my forearm. It's my left arm he holds onto, but his fingers slowly trail down until they finally pause on my calloused palms. My heart skips a beat now, or ceases working entirely. All I know true is the fire that scorches my cheeks and turns them a reddish pink color.

Stephen nods to me just as I close my fingers around his. "I'm certain."

Just like that, he is off with those circles of ancient symbols stemming from his fists again, and I watch his cloak sway in the wind. For a moment, I am trapped where I stand, unsure of how to

reignite my mind after a moment such as that. But then the smoke from the fire billows into a dark cloud, and I remember our current situation. I make dormant my emotions, then rush across the blocked off street.

The Asgardian who is behind all this finally takes a visible form, but it is one drenched in illusion. First, as they wander away from the destruction they are causing, flames licking their feet, they appear as myself, or how I used to be. A tragic villain in the midst of an identity crisis. However, then the person changes, mimicking the appearance of Wanda, who I know is sending the fire trucks away right now. Then, finally, they take on the appearance of the Sorcerer Supreme himself.

I ball my hands into fists. “Is this supposed to make fighting you harder for me?”

“Perhaps it will.” The Asgardian holds Stephen’s voice, but still clings to the accent of the Aesir. I tell myself thrice that Stephen is now distantly behind me, and that this is simply a caricature of him. Then, I breathe in sharply, and I advance.

The faux Stephen and I collide with fists full of bright green magic, the kind that mimics the appearance of fire. We become a mess of gritted teeth and blindsiding punches, and I find myself raising my head with blood dripping from my nose after I am brought down to my knees due to the strength of their seidr. Faux Stephen advances, but I switch my consciousness to an illusion of myself directly behind them, allowing myself to take them in a chokehold and try to force them into their own skin again. Through choked breaths, they murmur something in ancient Norse, the Old Language, and my body is set aflame on the inside.

“ARGH!” I release them in a hurry, then blindly stumble backwards onto the concrete below me. Breathing rapidly, I quickly glance around for signs of Stephen and Wanda, but through the smoke and haze, I can barely even see my attacker. Still, I feel their energy, so as I bring myself to a seated position, I release a scream that channels forth a burst of energy. A warbling circle of green magic is sent forth from me, and I hear a cry that sounds more feminine than I expect. For a moment I panic and scramble to my feet, and the smoke breeds familiarity around me. But the haze quickly recedes for now, and I am left facing a woman whom I never expected to see again. Her long black hair is that same as it always was, unstyled and instead left wild in the face of battle. Her long-sleeve dark green dress features a high neck, and the black combat boots she wears look similar to a kind that I used to have ages ago. The most recognizable feature of hers, however, besides her pallidity, is the fierce expression that clings to her features. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I feel myself wandering forward with a certain hesitance.

“It’s just another trick. An illusion.” I speak aloud to myself to further ignore the blaring of sirens and car alarms. New York is in a fit of chaos around me, and the apartment building that lies behind me is still up in flames. Not even the appearance of the night sky can quell this feral scene.

The woman’s lips curl into a smirk. “No, Loki. You killed my illusions.”

“Leah.” The word is more of a breath than anything. I reach out to her, extending my trembling hand. She examines it momentarily, quizzical at best. Then she latches onto it, yanks me forward, and punches me in the face. In turn, my vision becomes as black as the starless city sky.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

hey guys sorry for being behind on updates. i have a lot going on with classes rn but i promise i'll get this story finished :)

The sound of a clock ticking is the first thing I hear when my body decides to come to again. My eyelids are still shut, and I am still only able to register the darkness in which I am draped. Although it pains me slightly, I slowly begin to open my eyes. My other senses then approach me like a flood through open gates.

I am lying on the couch of the Sanctum, my feet elevated by a throw pillow that must be from some antique shop. It is also now dawn, or just past that, as sunlight streams in through the many windows that this foyer holds. As I begin to sit up, I turn my head to my left, and I nearly jump due to the shock that resonates after I see Stephen seated there in a wooden chair. He removes his concentrated gaze from the ground and meets my eyes, then raises an eyebrow.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he comments.

“Maybe I have.” I breathe in sharply, adjusting to a seated position and leaning back against the couch. “Were you watching me?”

“I was making sure you didn’t go into shock,” Stephen deadpans.

A smirk graces my aching face. “You really are still a surgeon at heart.”

“Or maybe I just want to make sure you’re alright.” Although I expected an equally mischievous expression to accompany his words, the only thing that actually does is a sigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have sent you off on your own.”

“No, no. I’m usually fairly capable. It’s just... I didn’t expect...” I shake my head and scoff. “I should discuss it with all of you, actually.”

“Wanda’s making tea. I figured you’d want a little bit to clear your head.” Stephen reaches out to take a strand of my tousled hair between his slender fingers. He brushes it back, then retracts his trembling hand. I don’t speak; I merely hold my breath.

“Your hands still shake?” I ask for confirmation, although I know. I’ve watched his hands make subtle and involuntary movements due to nerves and muscles that will eternally be damaged.

Stephen glances down at them, then up at me again. “Yes. It isn’t as bad as it used to be, though.”

“Hm.” I nod, dazed at his proximity to me. I realize I could sit and gaze at him for ages, or just listen to him mutter about Midgardian affairs. His gray eyes hold so much wisdom inside them, like the mirrors of the halls of Asgard. He reminds me of home in a way that makes home a dream.

“Stephen...” I lean forward, placing a hand on his own. He raises an eyebrow at me, but the expression melts into one of mild insecurity. His fingers twitch beneath my palm, a motion akin to the fluttering of a butterfly or moth against my skin. He puts his other hand on my shoulder, then

moves to close the gap between us.

All the pain I feel dissipates the moment I feel his lips meet my own. It's as if we have been cleansed by a wave of calm, and suddenly my senses are more alive than they have ever been before. As he pushes forward, I grip his shoulder, kissing back with a fervor. My mind feels fuzzy, serenaded by the symphony of feelings that presents itself to me. I want to be in this moment forever, to be in his arms forever.

Stephen breaks from me, though, and immediately whips his head to his left. Wanda has come into view and is leaning against the banister, appearing strangely mischievous. A cup of tea is in her hands. I feel a small smile light up my face before I glance down and laugh.

"I felt you creeping into my mind." Stephen says, cheeks slightly reddened with a blush.

"I wanted you two to have your moment, but I also wanted to check in. So," Wanda lets her voice trails off as she steps down the last few stairs. Stephen turns to me again, and the two of us exchange coy glances while Wanda comes around with the cup of tea. She passes it to me, and I take it in my hands before bringing it up to my lips for a sip. Its contents are not too sweet, yet not too bitter, and they instead act as some sort of reviving potion for me and my sore body.

"So, what happened after I lost consciousness?" I ask the two sorcerers.

Wanda takes a seat at the other end of the couch, moving the pillow that had previously kept my feet raised. "Stephen got you to safety, then we put the fire out."

"She got away, though. The Asgardian," Stephen adds with a sigh.

Wanda looks tiredly at him, then meets my gaze. "She was the woman you were speaking of, wasn't she?"

"She... she was. That was the reason I was so defenseless, the reason I ended up on the ground without a true fight." I sink back into the couch, placing my hands over my face. "I have to speak with her."

"Loki, she's a threat," Stephen warns.

I let my arms fall to my lap. "She's a friend. Besides, it isn't like she's doing all this on her own account."

"What do you mean?" Wanda asks.

"Seidr can be corrupted by dark magic as easily as the minds of telepaths can. It's different, though. It typically happens if you stop cultivating your seidr, if you stop practicing it. The magic lies dormant and fractured inside you, susceptible to dark forces." I turn to Wanda, nodding seriously. "The last couple times Leah and I were together, she had been neglecting her power. I never thought much of it because I thought she must have been using it in secret, since the reason she had been ignoring it was hatred from the other Asgardians."

"She must've given up the magic entirely," Stephen realizes, his gray eyes becoming alight.

"Which is exactly why our focus should be talking to her, as well as finding a way to remove the magic."

"The latter is easy. I have a spell for all of us to use." Stephen begins to rise from his wooden chair, causing it to creak. "The former is going to be the most difficult. We'll need to track her."

Wanda stands as well. “I can track her.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll get this all started immediately, before anyone else gets hurt,” Stephen concludes, eyes dancing between us. I am brought to my feet by not only his gaze, but also by the idea of saving a friend whom I should never have forgotten about. Schrödinger’s Box may be open, but Leah’s fate is still fragile in our hands.

Chapter 10

The lot of us are in Wanda's room, which is a small and neatly organized space which sound avoids. Wanda's dressers and desk have stacks of books on top of them, as well as small trinkets from her life in Sokovia. She has pictures of all sorts in cracked frames, pictures of her twin brother, the Vision, and two twin, although not at all identical, boys. All of the photos hold a melancholy air, and as I stand among them, I realize this woman has lost everything, just as I once had.

I swallow and gaze down at my feet, immune to Stephen's looming presence beside me. Wanda is sitting pretzel-legged on her bed, eyes aglow as she waves her hands and sifts through dimensions visible only to her due to her chaos magic. Although she is concentrated, she is still enough of a multitasker to be able to spare Stephen and me glances amidst her work. She raises one of her eyebrows in slight confusion, then opens her mouth to speak.

"You know, I only asked that you don't talk. You don't have to stare at me the entire time I search for her," she says blandly. I feel my face flush, then I quickly turn back to one of her nightstands and pick up her copy of *Wuthering Heights*. Idly I flip through the pages, entranced by the classic literature of this realm. Stephen merely bows his head and takes to examining his trembling hands.

After a few quiet moments, Wanda lets her hands fall to her lap, and she looks up at the two of us as the crimson glow fades from her irises. Her mouth is slightly open, and she tilts her head to the side in a curious manner. She then brushes a strand of hair behind her ear, still hesitant.

"Well," I ask, a tinge of anxiety in my voice. "Did you find her?"

"I... did. She's in... Upstate New York... Although I cannot tell if her illusions misled me." Wanda swallows, seeming unsure of herself.

"It won't hurt to check out the exact location if you can give it to us," Stephen comments as he steps forward.

"I should go as soon as possible," I conclude with a hush.

"We," Stephen stiffly corrects. "You out there by yourself didn't exactly go well the last time."

I wave my hand at the notion. "That is simply because I was caught off guard. This time, I'm prepared. She will *also* most likely run if we all approach her."

"So we send you in, and then you call for us when you are ready to rid her of the magic. Are you sure you're alright with this, Loki?" Wanda asks me, concern written in her features.

"I'm not sure of anything," I respond with open arms, causing Stephen to raise an eyebrow at me. "I never have been. At least this won't be any different."

"Right." Stephen extends his right hand and uses his left one to draw a circle from and to it. Sparks fly, then a golden portal bursts into existence, large enough for me to wander into. While still seated on the bed, Wanda views me with intense anxiety, but Stephen is stern, unwilling to show any fear if he is feeling any at all. But just as I turn to face the portal, fully prepared to step into the light of it, he takes my wrist and holds me there. I spin around again, mouth slightly open, face contorted in a bout of confusion. I am about to say something—anything—but he grips my waist, pulls me toward him, and closes the gap with a kiss. I find myself nearly falling into his embrace, taking a fistful of his shirt in my calloused fingers.

The two of us part, and he gives a smile. "For good luck, naturally."

"Naturally," I return.

With that and a small wave from Wanda, I wander into the portal, feeling the pull of another location draw me forward

The near-second it takes for me to travel through manmade rifts of this world is dizzying, drawn out, and seeks to derail my train of thought. But after an interdimensional pull and a feeling so overwhelming that it causes me to momentarily shut my eyes, I land on solid ground, surrounded by nothing but the sound of a murmuring brook. A night sky rests above this world, obscuring the many trees and paths that this forest most likely holds. I will my racing heart to be silent for at least a moment, trying to calm myself while the clouds move out of the way of the moon's gleaming light.

I glance around, the terrain now slightly illuminated for me to see. Distantly behind me lies the creek that sings, and right at its foot sits a woman with black hair reaching past her shoulders. She has her knees hugged against her chest, gaze set ahead at the forest's continuation before her. My feet begin to slowly carry me forth towards her, as if I am wandering to a mirage in a desert devoid of life.

I realize that the image is truly a mirage only the moment I feel an arm take hold of my neck. My breath is knocked out of me, and I feel panic well in my eyes for just a moment before I remember she is not the only sorcerer in this forest tonight. My mouth forms a thin line, and I immediately access the power I have. Not to fight, but to flee and protect.

While raising from the ground a group of Loki copies, I step on Leah's foot and cause her to cry out in pain. She loosens her grip on me just enough for me to escape her hold and stumble forward through the circle of copies. Leah in response seethes, rushing forward to grab me again. Her fingers wrap tightly around my wrist and my jaw, and I panic as she swiftly pushes me forward and towards the creek. Right as I am about to retaliate with my magic, she throws me down, submerging my head in the water. Its chill shocks me into a wide-eyed panic, and my inability to breathe or hear anything but the echo of the world around me makes me wish I had let Stephen and Wanda come with me. I kick and struggle to break free, running out of both time and air. My one free hand is caught in the rising current of the creek, but I manage to bring it up and raise it from the water. Just as Leah bends towards me, I harshly press my palm against her head, calling force an ancient memory.

The sounds of laughter intermix and mingle under the cover of this bright blue sky. The trees on the outskirts of Asgard bend towards us, their leaves rustled by the wind. Leah, long black hair blowing and eyes gazing ahead at the distant terrain, stands by my side. I reach out to her, smiling, appreciative of the one and only friend I have right now. Mystery awaits in the endless forests, and although excitement is not written in her features, it brews in her veins.

The next thing I know, I'm sitting up in this creek while gasping for air. The creek continues to run, less powerful now, but still sending water rushing around me. My hair and face are soaked, so I wipe my eyes while trying to catch my breath. In front of me and on solid ground, Leah stands, features blank due to the memory she has just experienced. The fact that we are in a forest now must throw her off as well, as she glances around, perplexed.

Birds chirp as she meets my eyes. "Loki."

But I am aware that the dark magic still seeks to corrupt her, so before she can snap back to her tainted mindset, I wave into the air a sparking green portal, calling forth my partners in crime.

Chapter 11

The chaos that ensues is a cacophony of magic of various hues. The bright green seidr combats the gold and red that stem from Stephen's and Wanda's hands, whereas my similarly colored seidr is lost among the mixture. It is a stark contrast to the dark sky above us, and I end up gazing at the night for a moment or two, feeling my heart harshly pound against my chest. I can't see much but the lingering brightness that each sorcerer's magic has blinded me with. At least Leah's magic is back to its usual color. The fact that it no longer resembles the ink in my journal must count for something.

Gritting my teeth, I turn and blindly cast green streams of magic towards who I hope is Leah. She screams and stumbles back as a response, nearly causing me to lose my focus as Stephen and Wanda struggle to keep her back with their own sorcery. The magic's power is as strong as a geyser, and Leah shields her face from it, caught in a fury. The dark magic still has a hold on her underneath this haunting night sky.

"Someone has to draw it out of her while the rest of us hold her back!" Stephen shouts, almost losing his footing for a moment. "I know how to do the spell with normal magic, but I'm not too skilled with seidr!"

My eyes focus on Leah's corrupted form as I purse my lips. "I can."

"Then get over here so I can give you the spell!" Stephen shouts.

"Will you be alright if I let go?" I ask him, still gazing ahead at where our magic meets.

"Yes!" Stephen snaps.

"Loki, let go!" Wanda adds before Stephen is even finished with his reprimand. It takes me a few moments of letting my eyes dance between my calloused hands and the magic that, against all odds, streams from them, but after a few seconds that feel like an eternity, I let my arms fall. Leah remains held by the other two sorcerers, but her black eyes meet mine for just a split second. In that second, I feel true fear.

"Loki!" Stephen jolts me out of that state of fear and prompts me to rush towards him, behind Wanda and out of the line of fire. Stephen keeps his one hand alive with defensive sorcery, but the other hand reaches out to my forehead. He speaks in an ancient tongue, then presses so hard that I nearly fall back. But, my mind becomes open to the spell he transmits to me, and I glance up, lips slightly parted.

"Go!" he directs. I stare at him for just a moment, then rush to take my place beside Wanda. She looks at me, nods carefully, then puts even more power into her work. Her eyes are alight with crimson, a hue so familiar to me.

I extend my hands, connecting from afar with the deepest part of Leah's soul. The magic has sought to tear it to shreds, yet I reach onto its now fading source. As I close my actual fingers, it's as if my spiritual fingers tightly grasp the darkness. I draw it out as one would hoist the sails of a ship.

There's more of a struggle as the magic fights to stay within her body, but I just grit my teeth and pull harder against the pressure. Stephen and Wanda both begin to slow their streams of magic down, hoping not to strike her when she comes out of her corrupted state. The darkness seeps into

the air of this forest, most likely hoping to dement this part of the woods. But just as I get the last bit out of her, and Leah collapses to the ground, Wanda redirects her magic and hits the darkness directly. The entity fades to ash and dust, falling onto the blades of grass until it disappears entirely.

There is a pause from everyone, a moment in which we catch our breath and try to cease the shaking of our limbs. Stephen breathes out any trembles that his hands held, running his fingers through his hair. Wanda maintains a blank expression, eyes focused on Leah. My long lost friend struggles to sit up, her black hair falling into her pale face. When she does manage to sit up, she looks at me, and her green eyes widen.

“I... Loki?” Her breath hitches. “It... It has been ages since I have last seen you.”

“Do you remember anything?” Stephen asks, walking briskly forward.

Leah swallows, glancing around while the chirps of crickets begin to sound again. “Some. It was like I knew I was doing awful things, but I had no way of stopping myself. I felt like someone had a hold on my mind.”

“Something did,” I simply say.

Wanda looks at me and confirms this with a nod. “Dark magic.”

“Your seidr lay dormant for too long, Leah,” I continue, now walking to stand beside Stephen as he practically hovers over her. “It became corrupted.”

“That’s only because the prejudices of Asgard prohibited me from using it.” Leah’s previously scared expression becomes fierce. “You know that more than anyone, Loki.”

I sigh heavily. “I do, but you don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Asgard has fallen,” Stephen fills in, looking at me sympathetically as the memories stir again within my mind.

“Good riddance.” Leah’s eyes narrow in a glare, but then her face becomes hollow. “Where does this leave me?”

“Wherever you want,” Wanda says with a gentle smile. “You have choices.”

“An abundance, it seems,” Stephen adds. I realize I’m smiling at the sorcerer supreme, then redirect the expression to Leah.

Cautiously and with ample hesitation, I step forward again, bringing Leah’s gaze to my own. “I know it’s been a while, and you haven’t really gotten to know Stephen and Wanda, but if you wanted, you could stay with us for a little while.”

“When did this become your house?” Stephen raises an eyebrow to ask me.

“When did it become yours and not Wong’s?” I retaliate with a grin. Wanda laughs into the palm of her hand, eyes alight with amusement.

Leah, however, seems to be unable to comprehend the invitation. “You’re suggesting I join you? Even after everything I’ve done.”

“Well, with the group we have here, I think second chances are our truest belief. Especially since

this one tried to blow up New York a decade or so ago.” Stephen gestures to me with his thumb, cape sentiently blowing in the wind behind him.

“What?” Leah raises her head in an instant, alarmed.

“Long story,” I tell her, because that is the most honest response I can muster right now.

“How about we discuss it over drinks at the Sanctum?” Wanda suggests with a smile.

“Sanctum...?”

“We’ll explain along the way, if you’ll join us for the time being.” I reach my hand out to Leah despite her audible confusion. She stares at my fingers for a moment, then carefully slips her hand inside mine. I aid her in standing, then return her gaze of contentment with one of my own.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Upon returning to the Sanctum Sanctorum with one more person than we left with, I can't help but feel like more life has been breathed into the old and drab building.

We stand in the foyer, gazing ahead at the steps and the snowy window behind them. It's only the two of us, Leah and I, but after everything, after not seeing her for ages, that's exactly how I would prefer things to be. She turns to me, radiant as ever before, and I realize I have finally reunited with one of the few people who truly understood me. My best friend, with smiling eyes and a laugh that sounds like home.

As she takes in the sight, Leah's breath hitches. "Midgard is... stranger than I expected it to be."

"Oh, believe me. It used to be much more boring before my brother and I came along," I say to her.

"Not true." Stephen swiftly passes us by, walking across the vast living room. "Superheroes have been here *far* longer than you and your brother have."

As he departs, I turn to the side, my expression showing my disbelief. "Says who?"

"Steve Rogers." Wanda walks by next, this time pausing before us with a smile. "Hi, Leah. I hope Loki's shown you your room."

Leah places her hand on her hip, turning to me with the tilt of her head. "He hasn't, actually."

"I was, I was getting to that." I clear my throat awkwardly, but both women simply laugh before Wanda leaves the same way Stephen went. Leah looks at me again, expectantly, and raises an eyebrow. So, I start across the floor.

"Follow me!" I proclaim, motioning for her to join me on the staircase. She obliges, and the two of us pass by the snowy window on our way to the sanctum's highest floor.

Her room is on the other side of my own, and we enter the previously dormant area mostly so Leah can see what it looks like. She wanders inside the small but cozy room with visible trepidation, admiring small figurines that lie on top of the nightstand and dressers. I keep distantly by her side, watching her study the room and calculate its potential before she sits down on the freshly made bed. She turns to me again, green eyes full of complexity.

"It's small, but it's also quite cozy," she tells me. "I'm honored to even have a place at all in this house, especially after all I've done."

"Eh... You haven't done *all* that much." I swallow, averting her gaze for just a fraction of a second.

Leah smiles. "Still, it means a lot to me."

"Well, your being here means a lot to *me*," I return, mimicking her joyful expression. She laughs and rises, all set to leave her room for now until she seeks it for rest later tonight.

“We should join the others for dinner. Maybe I’ll even enjoy Midgardian food,” Leah suggests with an amused expression.

I begin to slowly walk through the doorway with her, hands in my pockets. “I suspect you will. It’s far more interesting than any Asgardian cuisine.”

So we end up at the dining table again, this time more of a quartet. Stephen apparently ordered pizza, a meal I haven’t yet tried despite constant peer pressure. I ate a slice wrong the first time (apparently), as I had cut it up with a fork and knife until Stephen and Wanda shouted at me. Now I eat it as they do, laughing uncontrollably and trying not to make a mess of dinner. It’s uncharacteristic for me and more of something Thor would do, as Leah points out with a laugh. I’m surprised she remembers that far back, but it brings a smile to my sauce-and-cheese-covered face.

“So, Leah, have you ever been to Earth before?” Wanda asks curiously, leaning her folded arms on the table.

“Not officially. This is as intimate as I’ve gotten with the realm,” Leah sighs wistfully at the notion.

“I’m sure anything’s better than Asgard,” Stephen scoffs as he sips from his glass of water.

“That’s for sure,” Leah agrees with a laugh.

“They’re awfully stuck up where we grew up. You know, towards everyone besides Thor,” I follow up, leaning back in my chair.

“Towards sorcerers,” Leah specifies.

“Well, all of us have dealt with that at some point in our lives, so expect welcomeness all around.” The bridge of Wanda’s nose scrunches up as she smiles, causing the expression to be intoxicating of sorts.

“And expect confusion, because all of us are from different places in this damn universe,” Stephen adds with a mix of a scowl and a smirk. Laughter erupts, more contagious than gentle and appreciative smiles. It seems as if a family has been found, and after all I’ve been through, I conclude this is exactly what I need right now. It’s a privilege that Leah gets to be with me for the ride, and I’m so glad she was able to escape as I did.

After night has fallen and we have all departed, I end up knocking on Stephen’s door, breathing out shakily as I wait for any kind of response. The sorcerer opens the door after a moment or two, eyes meeting mine in a sort of hesitant but yearning manner. He freezes though, making no move at all, and I stand rigid, unsure of why my tongue has turned to lead yet again.

“Could I join you?” I ask simply, although the question has many possible implications and many possible answers. To my relief though, Stephen nods and motions for me to step inside so that he can close the door.

His room greatly resembles mine in its lack of decorations and rampant minimalism. However, he also seems to read each night as I do, as a book is lying on his pillow. I stand in wait as he moves it, noticing that he dog-ears his pages and scrunching my nose up at the fact.

“I wanted to thank you for letting Leah stay with us,” I tell him as he turns to face me again. “It means a lot.”

“Of course,” he returns with a surprisingly audible kindness. He says nothing more though. The

two of us stare at each other, expressions equally as vacant and unreadable, as both of us are so talented at dullness and falseness. His presence is alluring, though, and despite any lingering fear, I find myself stepping toward him and placing my hands on either side of his face. The two of us share a kiss that is full of warmth and longing, as if there is nothing else in the world that matters but each other. After a moment of holding onto each other and being reluctant to pull away, I make the move to do so, my eyelids fluttering open ever so slightly. He watches me with curiosity, tracing my cheekbone with two of his fingers.

“Can I stay the night?” I ask him now, leaning into his soft touch. “I just want to... lie by someone... wake up with them to the sunrise.”

“Would that be your dream reality?” Stephen returns in a low and quiet voice. I merely nod, tired from the weeks’ events.

“Please don’t take all the blankets,” Stephen asks as he begins to climb into bed. “It’s freezing in here and the heat barely works.”

I move to lie beside him, lifting the covers so that I can slip underneath them. “I’m a frost giant. I don’t exactly feel cold.”

“Well, you *are* cold,” Stephen realizes as he turns to look at me.

“Yes, you’ll have to put up with that, it seems.”

He examines me for a moment, the moonlight streaming in and painting his pale features. Then, he breaks into a laugh and moves to gaze at the ceiling instead, as if the reflection of the snow is far more interesting than I could ever be. But maybe that’s what I would like to be: ordinary. My whole life I felt I wanted to be the opposite, but if this is what ordinary feels like, lying beside the person you love on a chilly winter’s night, then ordinary is what I desire to remain.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone so much for all the love this fic has gotten. It means so much to me and I hope you check out my other works, because I definitely have something that I hope to write and post soon (and it's going to be hilarious). Regardless, the community here is what keeps me going through writer's block and lack of motivation, and all your kind words inspire me to put my all into my work. Thank you so so much for reading, commenting, and sending kudos :)

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